



## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

### JEFF IRWIN: NATURE AS TROPHY

September 13 to November 22, 2009

*Statement revised September 21, 2009*

Nearly two dozen ceramic sculptures by Jeff Irwin, an important and innovative San Diego artist whose works can be found in major museums and private collections internationally, are featured in "Nature as Trophy," a solo exhibition organized under the auspices of the Visual Arts Program of the San Diego Public Library. The exhibition runs through November 22 at the Earl & Birdie Taylor/Pacific Beach Branch Library, which houses the flagship gallery for the San Diego Public Library system.

Throughout his career, Irwin has used art to grapple with political, social, and environmental issues, especially as they relate to his love of nature and the great outdoors. This approach has culminated in powerful, elegant, and ironically humorous ceramic sculptures; ingenious hybridizations of seemingly disparate tree and animal forms. Works from Irwin's "White Works Series," for example, are hand-built from white earthenware and finished with a specially formulated satin white glaze. In their stark, pristine whiteness they resemble plaster casts of mutant specimens of taxidermy (animal head trophies, in particular), and are offered as metaphors and symbols for Man's uses and abuses of nature and the interconnectivity between forests and wildlife. On a deeper level, they comment on contemporary, consumer-driven culture and the psychological factors that motivate our behavior.

Eerily devoid of surface imagery, to Irwin the bone-white color of his sculptures symbolizes simplicity, clarity, and spirituality. "They simultaneously look lifelike and deathlike," observes the artist. He also notes that the white glaze of the White Works enables viewers to appreciate the subtleties of the sculpted forms. Just as important are the trompe l'oeil aspects of these works, that is, when viewers' erroneous perceptions lead them to believe that the sculptures are carved from tree trunks and painted white, rather than being fashioned from clay, fired, and glazed.

The twenty-five wall-mounted and pedestal ceramics showcased in "Nature as Trophy" come from related series: the aforementioned "White Works Series" (which many regard as his signature oeuvre) and the "Digital Transfer Tile Series." Most were created for this exhibition. Two of the largest White Works incorporate waist-high, rustically styled pedestals that resemble tables and, like the sculptures placed on top of them, are executed in white ceramic. This is a recent development in the artist's work.

Unlike the White Works, Irwin's exceptionally elegant "Digital Transfer Tile Series" is based on two-dimensional imagery. The finished works resemble framed drawings or paintings and hang on the wall. However, instead of being executed on paper or canvas, the images (and the patterns of the "frames") are fired onto grids of ceramic tiles. The image making and firings occur in several stages and incorporate many techniques including traditional mark-making by hand, digital photography, and laser toner transfer. Using layered imagery in his tile works enables Irwin to build a loose narrative around specific issues that interest him. For example, *Drain* (2009) addresses the wasting of fresh water resources and *Heater* (20009) [not in this exhibition] is an indictment of global warming.

One of the most beautifully resolved tile pieces in the "Nature as Trophy" exhibition is *Remembering Nature* (2009). The square composition is quartered into four sections, each containing a detailed line drawing of a human brain resembling a medical illustration. Each brain image, in turn, is superimposed on a collage of faded, sepia-toned photographic images grouped thematically. In combination with the brain imagery, these simultaneously represent the artist's fading memories of his encounters with nature; the slowly

decaying natural environment; or recurring patterns throughout nature. Irwin chose to juxtapose photographs of vein-like filigrees of tree branches with one of the brain images, thus reflecting their similarity to the networks of blood vessels that nourish the brain. Paired with another of the brain images, a group of photographs of stuffed animal trophies Irwin encountered on the walls of an Oregon airport reflect his sentiments on Man's domination of the animal world. And so it goes. Even the ceramic frame surrounding *Remembering Nature* is adorned with a hand-drawn woodgrain pattern mimicking the convolutions of a brain. Taking the brain/memory/woodgrain analogy further, the pattern becomes more faded the closer it gets to the brain images. In other tile pieces the woodgrain patterns resemble ripples of flowing water and the concentric rings of a marksman's target. It should be noted that the black and white, hand-drawn imagery of the tile works (largely created by scratching through a coating of unfired black glaze to reveal the glazed white tile beneath, then refired) evokes the graphic quality of woodblock prints. The artist sees this as yet another connection between himself, nature, and a timeless tradition in art.

Among the greatest challenges facing Irwin in creating the White Works is "engineering" them. His biggest and most complex works are difficult technically. Too large and fragile to fire and transport safely as a unit, Irwin designs and fabricates these sculptures in sections which are assembled on site at the time of installation. They can be easily disassembled for transportation or storage. From the beginning, another critical-but-invisible part of the engineering process for wall-mounted pieces is designing the system that will be used to hang them. This is customized for each sculpture.

Other major hurdles must be overcome during the sculpting process. Even though the sculptures are hollow, as many as fifty pounds of wet clay are used in each piece. The heavy weight of this malleable substance, which, when wet, sags under its own weight, combined with the irregular forms that Irwin prefers, necessitate that the clay be supported during the sculpting process and also during the ensuing two to four weeks it takes the clay to dry. Particularly challenging are the large, cantilevered pieces. With no base to rest upon because they will ultimately be mounted on a wall, Irwin sculpts them while they are lying on their sides or suspended mid-air from the ceiling of his studio using various devices he invents on the spot. "If I hadn't become artist, I probably would have been an engineer," he quips. The final stages, two firings in a kiln, are the most critical. These firings last several days and at any point during the process, cracks can occur. If this happens, weeks of work are lost.

Always experimenting by himself or in collaboration with contemporary masters of ceramic arts, such as Les Lawrence, Irwin has consistently challenged the perceived limitations of clay and glazes; indeed he has pioneered the development of many of the techniques found in his works. Seen together in the context of an exhibition, "Nature as Trophy" has transformed the gallery into a wonderfully absurd Museum of Unnatural History whose collection offers insight into environmental issues in ways that can only be envisioned by an artist.

Irwin will give an informal lecture about his art on Saturday, October 17 at 1:00 p.m. The exhibition, reception, and talk are free and open to the public.

Mark-Elliott Lugo  
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